1: Mi Mi Khaing 1-5 (no date) 1946 AP1 Burma
Burmese AP4

CHAPTER FOUR

647 565 177. 65 BY the time that I was about four years old my father had become a Subdivisional Officer in the Civil Service, and our family had joined the ranks of what has now come to be known as the *min-kadaw* class, an *a-so-ya min* being a government official and *minkadaw* the wife of a *min*. The minkadaws usually referred to were in the great majority the wives of officials of the Burma Civil Service, Class II, and by the time that we were passing through our childhood and adolescent years they already formed a very definite stratum in Burmese society. We children now comparing notes with the children of the minkadaws posted as far apart as Tavoy and Myitkyina can find common characteristics in all the households, from domestic commodities and meal habits to social conventions and standards of wealth. It is as though a new upper middle class has grown up, complete with snobberies, in what was formerly a classless Burmese society, but a class that still keeps itself quite apart from the European gymkhana life of the district towns.

631 647 344 The houses which I can remember, when my father was a Subdivisional Officer in the subdivisional towns of Zigon and Myanaung where he was in charge of the subdivision, or in the divisional headquarters town of Magwe where the whole hierarchy of min from the Commissioner downwards were present, or in the district headquarters town of Maubin where the min ranked down from the Deputy Commissioner and my father was Headquarters Assistant, all bore certain uniform features. They were all wooden, two-storied and large, with a sufficient number of big rooms to have a dining-room and an office room below, a sitting-room above the portico and two big bedrooms, besides little verandahs and odd rooms. They all had a front staircase for common use and one or two ladder-like staircases behind for watermen, sanitation and servants. The kitchen was about 20 yards away, connected by a covered passage, and at the back of the large garden or compound was the *tanya*, a row of rooms for men servants and Indian [351] servants. The garden in front was usually modest owing to frequent changes of occupants, but a minimum amount of flowers for daily vases on the altar had always to be cultivated, and fruit trees were prized highly, guava, mango, marian or citron.

692 357 Unlike most Burmese households we did not have any aunts or other relatives staying with us, but we had our full quota of domestic

dependents in whose company we spent most of our childhood. Min- 592
kadaws divide their servants into "downstairs servants" and "upstairs 357
servants". The downstairs variety are the usual domestics—cook, boy, gardener, office boy and so on. The upstairs variety are not referred to as "servants" (*a-say-khan*); they are girls whose work is all done in the rooms upstairs, who sleep there and spend the greatest part of their day in the quarters inhabited by the family. In many cases this system is one of abuse and oppression. The girls may be poor relatives—cousins in the fourth degree perhaps—or they may be bought up from poor parents who, for a sum of Rs. 25 to Rs. 100 down and intermittent gratuities, will allow their children to go into a theoretically better home. These girls come at any age from seven to fourteen years. They are clothed and fed and their *mon-bo* (sweetmeat money) depends entirely on the mistress they chance upon. When they are young they play with the children of the house and when older they sweep and dust the upstairs rooms—rooms on which we walk only barefoot as distinct from the downstairs rooms swept by an Indian sweeper, and on which they use a feather broom instead of wielding a broom of coconut sticks, thus sealing the distinction; they also wash the personal garments of the household, look after the children and all other housemaid duties. They are rarely kept alone; there may be up to four or five according to the household. The relationship with the family is that of feudal serf or poor relation. [601]
They do not call their employers *thakin* and *thakinma* (master and mistress); they address them as Aunt and Uncle-older-than-own-parents; they call the children of the family elder-brother or sister-so-and-so and address all relatives as the children do, but they have no definite salary, [584]
no rights and no external connections. It is only in rare cases, however, that girls reach the age of thirty in an environment not congenial to them; in ideal circumstances it is the duty of the mistress to settle them in an advantageous marriage by the time they are twenty-one or twenty- [583]
two. Failing this, the girls generally manage to elope, for elopements are frequent and not very scandalous in Burma.

In our childhood, when the family was big with growing children, we had five girls with us at one time. Of these, three were our relatives —two sisters, Ma Ohn Kyi and Ma Mya Shwe, who were third cousins of my father, and Ma Ngwe Yin, a second cousin of my mother. Both their families were far too poor to keep them. We had to pay respect to Ma Ohn Kyi and Ma Ngwe Yin who were both a few years older than me and called us all by our name, but nobody stopped us from bullying the young Mya Shwe and the two unrelated girls as much as we liked. A-Kyi, as we called Ma Ohn Kyi, was always treated as the senior one because my parents considered that she had a good moral character.

592 She was fairly pretty, very quiet and reserved towards us, and enjoyed
357 helping my mother with the babies, supervising the work of the servant girls and valeting my father. Ngwe Yin, who came to us as a very attractive girl with a reputation for being unmanageable even at a young age, always chose the task of taking us for walks in the evenings so that she could put on her nice clothes. She took us wherever she liked, or she sat with us at meal times and let us be as naughty as we wanted while she indulged in repartee with my father's clerks or chauffeur. Mya Shwe was my contemporary and playmate; she went to school while I was in boarding school but cut short her attendances the day I came home, irrespective of differences in our school calendars.

357 When A-Kyi was about nineteen it was announced to us that she
584 was to be married to my father's clerk, Maung Hla Bu. This young man was a favourite of my parents and had been a constant admirer of A-Kyi, helping her to make the beds when my father took the whole family on tours, but awaiting the graciousness of my parents before he dared to ask for her in marriage. My mother gave A-Kyi a small trousseau and a few pieces of jewellery, and they were married shortly before my father got a posting to another station. When a child was born, Mya Shwe, who had outgrown her days as a playmate for me, went to stay with them. Ngwe Yin, the beautiful girl, continued discontentedly for about a year, and then she eloped with a student protégé of my father's. I don't think either of my parents were very shocked at this.

357 My memories of the girls who worked for us are happy enough only
565 because my mother had been brought up in Grandfather's house where everyone was taught to do things for herself; in her character also was a pervading sense of tolerance. In some minkadaws' houses, however, I have seen two girls kneeling with soap and towel outstretched, while the mistress bathed herself. In more cheerful but no less aristocratic-minded households a meal laid ready on the table is the signal for one girl to get under the table and fan the mosquitoes off the legs of the family, and another to play the gramophone right through the meal My gay young uncle San Lin extended the domestic duties of his girls to the learning of modern songs which he liked, and he did his morning dressing to the accompaniment of his servant girls with powder on their faces and jasmine buds in their hair, swinging their feather brooms to the rhythm of modern love songs.

592 A-Kyi and A-Shwe and all the girls we had before and after them
431 bring back memories of the household articles which made with them a
513 background never recovered in our later Rangoon days. My mother,
286 like all minkadaws in the districts, did not depend on a big bazaar and
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1: Mi Mi Khaing I-5 (no date) 1948 AP1 Burma
Burmese AP4

CHAPTER FIVE

000 WHEN I was about five years old, my young brother, the third child of the family, died suddenly and created a gap of about seven years between me and the next child. My elder brother and I thus grew up apart from my younger sisters for a good part of our childhood.

• 357 524 Two boys were brought up to play with my brother and help my mother with the garden: I was given Mya Shwe to play with. A-Shwe and I were very attached to each other and liked the same games. Burmese children are not as interested in dolls, balls, animals and other toys of the European child; our treasures were chiefly in the form of seeds which play the same part in Burmese children's games as balls do in Western games. We had *go-nyin*, round flat seeds about two inches wide, from a jungle creeper which grew in my grandmother's garden in Ye. We rolled these along the ground to hit other go-nyins, like ninepins. When the family ate custard apples we collected all the seeds and washed them. These seeds provided us with several games; we scattered them in front of us and tried to flick as many as possible into a hole dug into the ground, or sometimes to flick each seed to touch another, removing one each time it touched until we could clear all the scattered seeds.

524 262 We could do this with tamarind seeds too: these were pretty black shining ones. We could get them from the kitchen but always preferred to take one of the boys on walks to tamarind trees. Hla Aung climbed the tree and brought down a cluster of fruits surrounded by delicate feathery leaves. We took a packet of salt along and ate the acid fruit dipped in salt, against all orders; we shredded the leaves till we got a big pile, wrapped them with the rest of the salt in stout paper, buried it a few inches in the ground and then all took turns at jumping on the spot, shouting: "*Bok-hsi-yay-Hsan, Hsan*: Oh pressed oil, come sprinkle, sprinkle." The moisture from the fresh leaves came out with the stamping and dissolved the salt, making a lovely savoury mess of the crushed leaves which we unearthed after a while and ate greedily. Then A-Shwe and I carried home the seeds to add to our collection.

524 301 *Kha-yay si* also we collected. These are seeds of the *kha-yay*, a tall tree which scatters its ripe fruit on to the ground where they lie until they dry, and shed their flesh and leave the seeds hidden amongst the

25: Ferrars E-5 (ca. 1890) 1901 APl Burma
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153. THE CHALLENGE (see p. 177).

the young wife's home, the lad working for her parents. As family comes and other daughters marry, the elder pairs are established in houses of their own. Married people are designated *ein-daung*—householders. Marriage makes no difference in the names and their prefixes. Everyone marries in Burma; the census of 1891 gave 1,306,722 husbands to 1,307,292 wives. The same census gave 102 females to 100 males of the Burman (so classed as Buddhist) population. (In Burma prostitution is confined to the large towns.)

A family of seven is considered large. The average number of house-occupants is 5·5. The cost of living of a Burman village household is 100 to 200 Rs. a year. In the towns the well-to-do spend 600 to 1000 Rs. and more, and at the present day keep a servant or two for the rough work, generally natives of India. Such accumulations of wealth as are made by individuals in India and other countries with a plutocracy and a proletariate are not paralleled among the Burmans. Nevertheless individuals amass tens of thousands of rupees, which for the most part they spend on works of religious merit. Monogamy is the received and almost universal practice in Burma. Second-wives are taken by a proportion of the officials and men of wealth. Hence it comes that the Burmans wonder more at the moderation of Europeans than at such license as they indulge. This license is not nearly so great as in India, but it is more open, corresponding to the higher status of the women of Burma, and thus it provokes more scandal in comparison. Unions of this sort among the Burmans are merely by mutual consent. A separate establishment in a different quarter of the town is maintained for the second wife or concubine (*maya-ngè*). Her children are under no disability, but she is not acknowledged by the first, and generally older, wife (*mayaji*), whose husband's love she is said to have stolen.

154. AN "ORIGINAL."